What Is a Logic Model and Why Is it Important?

A logic model is a one-page idea map showing how a program influences its participants to achieve outcomes, or sustainable life changes. A logic model includes a concise description of participants, inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, as follows:

- **Participants** are the individuals a program is designed to support who enroll in the program. Participants are defined by demographics and circumstances.

- **Inputs** are the resources a program uses to produce outcomes in its participants. Inputs include staff, volunteers, program supplies, curricula, money, administration, facilities, partnerships, staff training, and support.

- **Activities** are those in which your participants engage in your program. Specifically, we refer to the quantity, quality, and length of specific activities and relationships needed to engage your unique participants and help them achieve outcomes. This includes enrollment, engagement, program requirements, relationships between staff or volunteers and participants, and any necessary quality standards. Codified activities mean you have a theory about how much of which activities are needed to help your population get to outcomes.

- **Outputs**: The quantity of codified program service provided. Outputs are usually defined as the number of participants who enroll in, attend, and complete a program.

- **Outcomes**: Measurable, meaningful changes in the people, organizations, or communities that a program serves. Initial outcomes (knowledge, skills, values, attitudes) lead to intermediate outcomes (changes in behavior, milestones), which, in turn, lead to long-term outcomes (new life condition).

A logic model draws a one-page word diagram illustrating the complex influences between these five program elements, to show how the program is designed to work for the benefit of its participants. A good logic model meets these criteria:

1. It focuses on only one participant (linked logic models can show influence between two related groups of people.)
2. The outcomes are meaningful, measurable changes in participants, resulting logically from program operations:
   - Long-term outcomes take place no more than 1 to 2 years after program completion
   - Intermediate outcomes are behaviors and significant milestones for which the program is committed to be accountable
3. Activities show the specific dosage and duration needed for the full sequence of outcomes
4. Diverse stakeholder voices are included in creating the logic model
5. The language is clear, detailed, and concise

Some logic model formats also depict complex influences outside the program itself. While a basic logic model should include the five basic components of participants, inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, similarities end there. You may choose from many different formats, some complex and some simple. The more complex versions can include a depiction of the community and organizational contexts and influences, and can show the feedback loop of learning that results from evaluating program data. When creating or updating a logic model, it’s always a good practice to ask, What are some of the unintended negative consequences that could happen as a result of implementing this program? This reflection can lead to a stronger program design that stops you from causing harm where you intended to help.
When creating a logic model, it’s important to remember that a program can only influence those people who are enrolled in the program. It cannot help the individuals it does not touch. Realistically, my program likely does not influence the inequitable, invisible, counter-intuitive systemic influences that create the community’s need for the program in the first place. Unfortunately, my program likely cannot end systemic injustice; at best, it can equip some people to succeed anyway.

Logic models are only useful to map programs designed to influence outcomes, or enduring changes in participants’ lives. They are not a good fit for mapping programs that deliver quality services only, without accountability for changing people’s lives, for example food pantries, some shelters, and some recreational programs.

A logic model can be useful for different purposes in the life of a program, for example:

- Program design stage: People with different interests and perspectives can create a logic model together to envision and agree on what a program might look like and what it might accomplish.
- Program planning stage: Program leaders can use a logic model to prepare to gather all the resources needed to operate the program and can clearly communicate the program design to potential funders and partners.
- Program implementation stage: Program stakeholders can use a logic model to align a program within the overall mission and strategy of the organization and to prepare to gather data on program implementation, compared with the plan.
- Program improvement stage: Program stakeholders can use a logic model to prepare to gather data on participant progress and outcomes and to analyze it to improve the program. It also serves as a key foundation for external program evaluation.

Here are four good links for further reading on logic models (among many more!):

- United Way of America’s Measuring Program Outcomes Guide (out of print)
- Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide
- University of Wisconsin Extension School website
- Robert Penna’s Outcomes Toolbox